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ABSTRACT

Which, when, and how elements of a fashion are adopted by a particular person or group are indicators of how that person or group is viewed by others within their society. For men who have worked in business and commerce, the clothing has changed little since the rise of the commercial middle class. The business suit remains unaltered because its very stability of form suggests a stability of the business world. When women in greater numbers entered business jobs and after the rule books about women's professional dress were published, the suit became the most important part of the wardrobe. In general, women's clothing has tended to be much more idiosyncratic than men's. While it reflected a general style of the community, it also had more leeway to reflect the individuality of the wearer. Although the skirted suit helped to blend the professional woman with the professional man on a visual level, the wives and daughters of these professional men are changing wardrobes to new alternatives, thus making the women coworkers dressed in this professional uniform appear dowdy and, consequently, less attractive. A woman's dressing for business is an enormous balancing act. She can easily be criticized for being unfeminine or criticized for being dressed "unprofessionally." Since clothing symbols convey visually the structure of the whole society and bespeak the human social order, a further exploration into the rules that govern this nonverbal system seem to be a valuable topic for further exploration. (HOD)

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Gender Significance of Dress in the Organizational Setting

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Humans are the only species to create coverings and decorations for their bodies beyond what nature has issued. According to most anthropologists, the practice is ubiquitous. Unsurprisingly, then, the phenomenon of body adornment has been studied by historians, sociologists, psychologists, semiologists, anthropologists, and art historians. In the past, bodily covering has been viewed variously as: a practical necessity for human existence in inclement weather; a logical artifact stemming from the human instinct for modesty; a trifling example of human foolishness and excess; or a historical progression of design ideas unconnected with wearer and society. These approaches have validity but fail, each in a different way, to account for the great amount of human resources and interest that have always surrounded the clothing phenomenon. Recently, however, some scholars have come to view the clothed body as an extension of human symbol making and using behavior; that is, clothing has come to be recognized as a nonverbal symbol system that augments the verbal symbol system in important ways.

A number of recent scholars in very different fields have approached the study of clothing from the communication perspective. Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher (in Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1965, p. 57) suggested that all societies need a visual system for portraying clearly the interrelationships among persons within that culture and for communicating other facts that the particular society judges as important.

> Observable relationships exist between patterns of dress and adornment and social organization. First, all societies are so organized that they have patterns of role differentiation based on age and sex, and ordinarily these social distinctions are reflected in dress. Second, roles associated with positions in the common social organizations of family, polity, economy, religion, and caste and class are often reflected in dress.

Alison Lurie's book, The Language of Clothes (1981) develops the thesis that clothing is a nonverbal symbol system analogous with, but not identical to, language. She maintains that clothing does have "a vocabulary and a grammar like other languages" (p. 4), but neither she--nor anyone else to our knowledge--has developed a dictionary for "reading" the clothing symbol system.

Part of the problem in developing such a dictionary comes from the elusive nature of the artifacts themselves in Western society. Here, unlike the fixed nature of clothing in traditional societies such as the Middle East, the fashion process continually pumps into the society new clothing forms. Although some writers suggest this variation negates the communicative function of clothing, we believe that the fashion process only confounds the communicative function of clothing and multiplies the possibilities of "messages" by adding another dimension--that of change. A kaleidoscope provides an appropriate analogy of the difference between a static dress society and a fashion-oriented one. At rest, the kaleidoscope produces a single pattern, the colored glass pieces forming an interrelated whole analogous to static dress practices. As the tube-like instrument

is turned, the pattern melts into another and another. Each subsequent image is a small but continual reshaping of the previous one, creating a perception of dynamism that rivets attention not only to one design but to an anticipation (albiet imperfect) of the unfolding future. Fashion, then, attracts attention because of its inherent variety and movement. It creates complexity through the shifting and realignment of forms that are, in fact, a reorganization of relationships. This visual change reflects the social flux in complex, mobil societies.

Of course, not all elements or individuals within a society change at the same time or rate. There is always a "core of change." The relationship of other elements of society to this core of change has meaning within the society. Which elements of a fashion are adopted, when and how they are adopted by a particular person or group within the larger society become indicators of how that person or group is viewed by others within that society.

To reiterate before proceeding--clothing performs a very specific act of visually depicting the structure of societies. The image reflected by humanity clothed bespeaks the human need for order and understanding. Thus, division, alignment, and hierarchy of the kinds important to society will inevitably be the most significant functions of clothing symbols.

To mark the distinction between male and female has been throughout history and in all cultures one of clothing's most important functions. In Western society, the distinctions have always been great. For men who have worked in business

and commerce, the clothing has changed little since the rise of the commercial middle class. Since the French Revolution, when men learned that fancy dress dispatched them to a quick, bloody end, they have worn dark, severely tailored suits with unadorned shirts and a necktie. No matter how rich or poor, young or old, work or recreation, whether in large corporations or small business, the businessman wears very similar and slowly changing garments.

Occasionally an unusual burst of change alters men's clothing--such as during the late 1960s. But the change lasts for a short period after which the time-honored dark suit is once again supreme. For those who have forgotten or not learned the rules of such dress, a John Molloy will lay out the few rules of "dressing for success." Most often the rules have already been learned on a nonverbal level at an early age and are rarely discussed by adults.

This businessman's form of dress is rarely called a uniform, since "uniform" is a clearly defined term meaning one or more pieces of clothing that are dictated from above and are absolutely unalterable by the wearer. The male business suit stops just short of uniform status. The margin of difference is small, but it is important. In this margin falls the important distinctions such as between salesman and corporate executive. Even in such a narrow range of choices, status, wealth, and taste are conveyed.

Why do businessmen limit their clothing choices so severely, particularly in the Western world where personal freedom is

prized so highly? The advantages are many. First, the business suit is a world-wide symbol of wealth, power, and prestige. In the past, ermine and fine fabrics of the aristocracy were costly and unavailable to the masses. Now, rather inexpensively, a shoe salesman can look like a corporate executive--a point not lost on John Molloy. In addition, the suit is inextricably linked with the job. It conveys a commitment to professinalism. A man who wears a business suit is a businessman. And since job and status are so closely related in our society, the indication of one presumes the other. The primary visual image of the man is this link between himself and his work. The business suit remains unaltered because its very stability of form suggests a stability of the business world--a world so fraught with flux and innovation that any symbol of tradition and solidity is tenaciously grasped. Also, the businessman's wardrobe is long lasting and needs few expensive, frequent changes. This factor relates not only to actual value for dollar invested but symbolically represents a no-nonsense character of the wearer who places himself above the follies and excesses so closely associated with fashion change. As mentioned, the very cut and cloth of the business suit suggest a prudent lack of superflucus ornamentation--in fact, a denial of such excesses. The business suit can thus be seen by all as a traditional, practical symbol of man in the market place.

What then do women wear when they leave their traditional roles and enter the male-dominated business world? Of course, John Molloy and many others have offered rule books for this

change of events. Generally, the experts told women to wear a "feminized" version of the male business suit--a dark-colored suit differing from men's only in that it have a tailored skirt instead of pants and include a tailored blouse and a tie at the neck. The skirted suit is not a new garment in women's wardrobes, but when women in greater numbers entered business jobs and after the rule books about women's professional dress were published, the suit became the most important part of the wardrobe. It became fashionable not only for working women but for all fashionably-dressed women. The suit worked well for women in the market place because it bespoke the same professionalism and no-nonsense approach to dressing that the men understood. Men also felt comfortable with this garment--so close to their own. If the new member of a club wears the club uniform, integration and acceptance are easier.

As easy as the clothing solution seemed for women entering the market place, the clothing choices have been, and continue to be, even more problematic. The difficulties arise from the traditional differences in men's and women's clothing choices. In the last 200 years, Western women's dress has not been job related, as has men's. Women's clothing functioned in many different ways. Women's clothing has tended to be much more idiosyncratic than men's. That is, while it reflected a general style of the community, it also had more leeway to reflect the individuality of the wearer. One might suppose that since the job did not define a woman as it did a man, the personal taste and style that more individualized clothing expressed was used

by women to define themselves. A more often used reason for women's more involved and more fashion-oriented clothing was as an attention-getting device. Before marriage a woman set herself apart from other women and tried to make herself more attractive than others. Well chosen clothing allows the human shape to be shown advantageously, the worth of the family to be displayed, the taste and the personal grooming habits of the person to be revealed. Since women have traditionally been the askee, rather than the asker, in marital contracts, women have often felt clothing was a personal ally in her very passive role in that contract.

Another function of women's dress has been detailed by Thorstein Veblen in his The Theory of the Leisure Class (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1973). He explains that men send out their wives and daughters to parade opulent fashions and jewels that bespeak his business success to the world. Veblen did not go on to explain that if any criticism of conspicuous consumption or aesthetic merit be leveled against the richly-dressed woman, it most certainly fell on their heads and not on their husband's, whose only fault was being a good provider. Should you think such criticism was not given liberally, the most cursory review of cultural criticism will set you right. We believe that much historical criticism of women in general can be traced to criticism of her dress since so frequently has it been a point of ridicule and a prime example of sinful behavior.

So, traditionally, women have dressed to display the level of affluence and status of their families, display themselves

for the marriage market and display their own individual characteristics. All of these characteristics are seen in women's clothing more clearly then in men's. In addition, women's clothing has traditionally changed more frequently and more radically than men's--that is, it has been more influenced by the fashion process. Part of the reason for this relates to Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption. Part relates to societal pressure for women, unlike men, to appear up-to-date or in style. An out-of-style woman is viewed as dowdy--a criticism that is hardly ever leveled at men and one that undercuts a woman's worth faster than all others. It particularly undercuts her attractiveness rating which, as many studies have shown, is much more clsely linked with a woman's percieved intelligence and competence than is men's.

For several years, women have been complaining about the skirted suit that Molloy dictated. This man-tailored suit is not in fashion today--as it was several years ago. Women are changing the cut of the suit for more fashionable looks and changing to dresses or sweaters and skirts instead of suits.

Although the skirted suit helped to blend the professional woman with the professional man on a visual level, the wives and daughters of these professional men are changing wardrobes to new alternatives, thus making the women co-workers dressed in this professional uniform appear dowdy and, consequently, less attractive. Also, the functions traditionally associated with women's clothing have not disappeared since women have begun wearing a professional suit. The professional woman must look both professional and, at the same time, wear a traditionally

feminine, fashionable wardrobe.

Women's dressing for business is an enormous balancing act. She can easily be criticized for being unfeminine or criticized for being dressed "unprofessionally." Well-known women in politics are usually faulted in both directions. Unlike her male counterpart, many women find it almost impossible to please everyone.

Women now realize that very real negative consequences come from disregarding the professional dress rules of the market place. Since small differences can be important ones, women must learn the rules of the particular business community in which they function and either adhere to them or risk the consequences.

The future will be brighter for women if the more diverse and individual tone of men's dressing, now seen in less tradition-bound careers, could be extended into the broader business community. We know, however, that organizations and the rules that govern them are slow to change. We would hope that both men and women who hope to be perceived as intelligent, competent, and powerful might not be frightened of being perceived as attractive, creative, and individual.

Since clothing symbols convey visually the structure of the whole society and bespeak the human social order, a further exploration into the rules that govern this nonverbal system seem to us a valuable topic for further communication research.